## Doing Academia in "COVID-19 Times"

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When lockdowns began, time began to take on a quite different quality. For many of us, days were no longer ordered according to our usual schedules: school drop off, making the train, meetings, teaching, scheduling tomorrow and next week, school pick up, social activity, children's after school activities, and bedtime routines. For some, keeping a routine is something we now have to make an effort to do (though "routine" might still be too generous a term for what our lives have looked like). Other than some scheduled Zoom meetings to focus our attention, getting up, putting together three meals a day, an hour of mandated "exercise" outside, and wine o'clock are what have kept us ticking. It sounds simpler, in a way; relaxed, even, compared to the relentlessness of our ordinary schedules. But it is not. It is not relaxing. It is not ordinary. The lockdown, the shutdown, is more than a rupture of the ordinary. It seems we are experiencing a profound, traumatic break. The conditions of the ordinary, as Jonathan Crary has argued, are "defined by a principle of continuous functioning" (Crary, 2014, p. 8). More specifically, continuous productive functioning. Just functioning isn't enough. And as we now start to face what 'the new academic year' looks like, the profundity of what we have experienced seems to be second to the need to 'get back to work' and maintain our willingness to invest in the competitive practices that fuel the systems we live and work in.

Our response to this emerged from making similar observations from our respective contexts (New Zealand, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Belgium), and is shaped by our work in the field of educational philosophy. Originally published as a blog, this short essay is an attempt to make sense of the way in which academia has responded to these profound changes in how we live and work, to ask what it says of academia that having a say on these matters, matters, and to question the will to provide answers amidst ongoing turmoil. (And, yes, we also acknowledge the irony of our having something to say about people having something to say about COVID-19).

The COVID-19 lockdown is the evidence we didn't need that academia depends on our having internalized the demand for competitiveness, visibility, and productivity. Slavoj Žižek has a [book out on the pandemic](#) already (Žižek 2020). Yes, he's an internationally renowned public intellectual so of course he has written numerous comment pieces and blogposts on it. But a full-on book. Already. The European philosophers/theorists Giorgio Agamben, Jean-Luc Nancy, Bruno Latour and other public intellectuals have also commented on the current health crisis. Not a surprise. It is not the content of their hot takes that is the concern here. Rather, it is the ongoing production of new takes and counter-takes that these generate and, more specifically, the apparent need to identify oneself as "having something to say about" COVID-19.

Medics, epidemiologists, those with genuinely useful expertise on saving lives and managing pandemics? As you were. Social scientists and humanities scholars? Why do you want to have a

say on this crisis, in your professional capacity, right now? Why the need to define it in particular terms, and to claim credit for understanding it? You might ask: Did we just write this out of bitterness, because we have school-aged children who were suddenly at home all day every day and our productivity was being hampered? Possibly. It is not just the research aspect of our work that was difficult to keep on top of this year. And we are not writing from outside of the demands for productivity and visibility after all. (Not only do we acknowledge the irony of "having something to say about people having something to say" about COVID-19, but also we recognize the irony that our four different time-zones allow us to work when the others are asleep: living the capitalist dream of productivity!). But, there is an overlap between those sharing calls for papers on "[insert topic/field/discipline here] in COVID Times" and those who have built their careers partly on critical takes on the regime of what has been termed, "pathologies of professionalism" in academia (O' Connell, 2019). The need to be a productive, visible, socially impactful researcher, be excellent at teaching, and maintain an instagrammable work-life balance is a matter of serious concern across academia (as recent strikes in the UK and countless academic articles illustrate), but perhaps particularly in the social sciences and humanities, where quick-fix policy responses are less appropriate to the forms of scholarship that characterize these fields. So, bitterness, perhaps. But more genuinely: frustration and disappointment.

Sociologist Deborah Lupton, for example, is right on top of this global crisis. On March 22$^{nd}$ she launched a call for papers for a special section of *Health Sociology Review*: "In response to [today's] widespread and dramatic changes, HSR will provide a forum for sociological commentary, with a rapid paper submission and review process to ensure that papers are available as quickly as possible" (Lupton, 2020a). Rapid response sociology. Abstracts to Professor Lupton by April 9$^{th}$. Full piece by May 15$^{th}$. Two weeks later, having published a social research agenda for a COVID and post-COVID world in the meantime (Lupton, 2020b), Lupton tweeted: "Surely it is not too soon to announce a new generation – Generation COVID – the children and young people now whose lives have already been transformed and will be throughout their futures by the pandemic and its fallouts" (Lupton, 2020c).

In the midst of a pandemic that is bringing about "widespread and dramatic changes", surely it is too soon, actually. But in academia: not too soon at all, it seems. Inevitably, children's lives have been transformed: they are not doing what they would ordinarily be doing. Many of them were living in already life-threatening situations. This pandemic will only exacerbate that. (So, we are by no means saying that sociological issues – indeed, matters of social justice – have no relevance here.) Inevitably, policy made "post-COVID", if we can even confidently claim that as a useful term, will shape children's lives. And, of course, it is our responsibility as the older generation to make decisions about what that might look like. But already framing an entire generation in terms of something that is still very much happening, its eventual impacts unknown, might be more of a denial of responsibility than first appears.

Sociologist Jennie Bristow, who specializes in the study of parents and families, has written what, at first sight, can be read as a critique of the speed with which current events are being defined by her fellow scholars: "The next label we can expect to emerge is the 'Corona generation', or some variant of this" (Bristow, 2020). Further on she writes: "Commentators are now going to be

competing to declare how the global Covid-19 crisis is going to affect the kids living through it, and we can expect a whole load of nonsense on that front" (ibid.). It is indicative of how academia works that Bristow needs to make such a comment; not making visible one's disapproval might tacitly seem like agreement with these new labels. Ultimately, though, Bristow seems to agree with the "COVID generation" tag (but perhaps it is too soon to come up with anything else.)

In the economy of visibility, our expertise needs to be broadcast. And there is an understandable desire to do so. Locked out of our normal schedules, being able to offer expert comment makes us feel in some way useful. We can't do anything about the fact that we didn't become proper doctors; theoretical hot takes are all we have. Making our expertise visible is important, even if our expertise is not in the thing we are talking about. What is also interesting about these pieces is that both Lupton and Bristow open by stating at some length their credentials for having something to say.

It is unfair to single out these two academics. But, as we know, twitter is an echo chamber and these examples were most visible to us. There are plenty of other examples, though. Here are just three: the article [Post-digital research in the age of COVID-19](#) (Jandrić, 2020; published 21 March); the *International Review of Education* issued a Call for abstracts for a special issue on the theme ["Education in the age of COVID-19"](#); and Social Sciences and Humanities Open issued a Call titled ["Coronavirus & Society"](#). It is also unfair to implicate individual academics: publishers need content; universities need outputs; metrics still provide our measures of success. There is a much wider picture here. Caution is advised over making too-quick judgments on what parts of the ordinary will remain in "post-COVID times." Though some commentators are suggesting that education–from schools to universities–will not or should not return to business as usual, to ask whether the pandemic could be [the end of capitalism, as the journalist Paul Mason (2020) does,](#) may be premature. (The way the reopening of universities in the US and the UK is taking shape, and the availability of COVID testing based on the ability to pay supports this.)

Indeed, a new normal seems already to be installing itself: "digital is the new normal." The way we have rapidly adapted teaching and assessment (as well as meetings, exercise, and socializing) from face-to-face to online formats is unprecedented, yet seems to be setting a precedent for what is possible: universities have been keen to engage in more online provision for years, with some resistance from academics who now fear that what is exceptional today may become a norm in the near future. The emergency has given us a test case and we have shown that we can run courses online. The ed tech currently promoted at all levels of education is also seizing the [opportunity to become essential (Williamson, 2020)](#). The "COVID19 generation" certainly exists as a body of data, if nothing else.

As the calls for papers and contributions above seem to illustrate, the will to gain visibility, think entrepreneurially, maintain metrics, and achieve impact have become defaults in how we conceive what it means to be a good academic. Not only that, but as Franco Berardi has noted, in digital conditions, the most specialized workers–"high tech workers", as he calls them–"tend to consider labor as the most essential part in their lives, the most specific and personalized" (Berardi, 2009 p. 76). Mario Di Paolantonio deftly applies Berardi's insights to education and the

form of learner, and worker, it requires today: "the constantly adaptable and perfectible subject of learning required by neoliberalism" is "a subject who is tasked with continuously optimizing itself (its brain) so that she is ready to face the inevitable menacing economy of constant-frantic change, built-in obsolescence and the threat of disposability (abject-lives), lest one is unprepared or not 'nimble' enough to take advantage of the latest work-related demands or gadget-know-how requirements" (Di Paolantonio, 2019, pp. 603-4). Given this, the will to remain productive, even if that means being parasitic on a virus currently claiming thousands of lives and leaving others without basic care and resources, makes sense. The logic of visibility and entrepreneurialism, finding new ways to deploy one's expertise, remains paramount. Berardi's "soul at work" seems to make its presence known in this context as a (pernicious) academic super-ego at work. But if, as academics, our work is "the most essential part of our lives, the most specific and personalized," i.e. what makes me "me," as opposed to Mum or Dad or "anonymous otherwise not very useful person in a pandemic," then this may be how we deal with the lack of the ordinary.

The disappearance of our ordinary busy-ness has not created more time; it has forced us into dealing with a different ordering of time, and with ordering in time and space the many different practices we have to engage in, or even invent as we go along. And in many cases, this means having to factor in other people who are usually elsewhere. It is against this background that the entrepreneurial academic wants to be who she or he is (invited to be). And a sense of failure looms in every single moment of the day, as the entrepreneurial academic is constantly prompted to keep up and prove his or her relevance, as they post and broadcast their "unique" and "clever" take in the face of a pandemic. Although seemingly speaking to a different time, Byung-Chul Han's point still applies: "a subject that is formed through or by work will not find a different perception of the world during times that are free from work" (2017, p. 100). Admittedly, even amidst the suspension of "business as usual" (which the pandemic necessarily demands), we academics are still caught in a ceaseless busyness and agitation with our occupation, a restlessness that threatens to foreclose the time required to forge a different perception of our world today.

A particular kind of academic entrepreneurialism is working at full strength. In certain circles of academia, the pervasive pathos seems to be "I am the one who knows." (The usual suspects– experts–appear on television. And in places where public intellectuals gain less digital traction, various celebrities have also offered lockdown advice.) Reassuring the public is, of course, important at this time. And, if not politicians, then public health officials and medical experts are certainly well placed to try to do this. But research in the social sciences and humanities is not about what we know now, or what is reassuring. It is there to expand on and challenge this, to offer new insights, based on in-depth analysis over time. It needs to take time in order to properly think our time. It is, ultimately, untimely. Hence, the tension many feel, all the time but particularly now: between the "hot take [insert latest event/crisis here] studies" (Gopal , 2020) approach and the scholarly values that characterize these fields.

So, in the face of potential failure, of having nothing to say, of feeling unable to nimbly adapt to these "unprecedented" conditions (it is not permitted to write about COVID without using the word unprecedented), is it the kids, so-called Generation COVID, we are most worried about?

Perhaps it is our own sanity most at risk. It is, after all, not our children's minds these analyses, theories, and new terminologies seek to put at rest, much as they might be concerned with optimizing learning-at-home opportunities during lockdown. The overwhelming presence of explanations and "ways to understand" gives a clear sense that, actually, we do not know how to deal with this situation. And why would we? It is unprecedented. The many explanations of and attempts at "defining" what is going on are, so it seems, there to appease first and foremost the adult generation. To a more extreme extent than the parenting literature that frames inevitable, existentially difficult aspects of raising children as solvable challenges, advice on coping with the pandemic has even less of a basis in robust research. Indeed, noted author of *Your Baby and Child*, Penelope Leach has revised her advice on screen time: previously a no-no for the under twos; now, "an emotional lifeline" (Hellen and Griffiths, 2020).

Instead of finding ways to characterize and define the younger generation, it seems to make more sense to take this crisis as an occasion to turn back on ourselves. To an extent, this is what the lockdown and the suspension of normal does: it throws us back upon ourselves. This is uncomfortable as it goes against our tendency to constantly throw ourselves forward: to plan, do, produce, to render the world into my project. It would make more sense to "name" the very generation doing the naming (and perhaps to acknowledge that it isn't that helpful (cf. boomers, millennials, etc.)).

In looking back, as the humanities and social sciences do, we can recall Vico's words: We become all things by not understanding them (*homo non intelligendo fit omnia*) (1984). Encountering the unprecedented, we are thrown back on ourselves, not in order to know or to understand, but to become. The current flurry of COVID-19 conference announcements, special issues, and think pieces cannot not understand. In fact, they understand too much. In a knowledge economy of hot takes and the performance of screaming productivity, a lack of understanding is disavowed in favor of understanding better, faster, and louder. Yet acknowledging a lack of understanding gives us some room to consider what we're becoming, which, perhaps, is the central curiosity for humanities and social sciences. There are already so many explanations of and attempts at "defining" (grasping, in the Heideggerian sense) the "thing" that is going on. But this is a genuine and complex question: what *is* going on? Do we know? Our experience right now is, no, we don't. Beyond the day-to-day, we cannot fully grasp, let alone adequately theorise, what is happening, what is changing, and what will remain changed long after this. We are relating to those closest to us, in a physical sense (partner, children), and also with those far removed from us but for whom we have a responsibility, be they family, friends, colleagues or students, in ways that are not familiar. Some of those closest to us may not even have a sense that anything much is "wrong," simply because they're too young to understand. So, arguably, who are we to define for them this situation as "abnormal" or "unusual"? For all we know, some might remember this period in a few years from now as that "fun time when mum and dad were home all the time." We don't know.

Clearly, uncertainty speaks to academics' need to explain and understand, especially when work has become so central to our identity and sense of purpose. This is what we do, don't we? Give explanations, and offer the public ways of understanding the situation they're in. (Or this is what

we are expected to do.) The urge to understand and find answers is natural. It drives all of our incessant scrolling for news updates and analysis. But so much of the "interpretation" seems driven by an anxiety born of not being busy; and it unsettles us. Maintaining a sense of oneself as a productive academic may be a way to cope with the situation.

But if it's not that, what's wrong with waiting? And thinking? Do we need to act productively (to define; explain; claim understandings) while in the midst of what is going on? There is a profound transformation of the social, political, and educational going on, and that transformation is already being defined without accounting for the very experience of being transformed. The profound crisis that the pandemic is unleashing is surely transforming, un-forming, deforming, reforming the world as we knew it. However, caught in the action, and yet to fully feel the impact of the intense blows this time has dealt, it is difficult for us to truly think what is not yet thinkable, what still remains illegibly too close for us to have any proper perspective. Our theoretical knowledge doesn't afford us some magical ability to stand outside of what is happening and have a clear overview of it. We have to have the courage to say not only that things are not normal now but also that the future has lost the atmosphere of predictability. Things are incomprehensible, we do not understand what is occurring, and we have no answers. In this atmosphere we find ourselves forced to find better questions. This takes time. And, we need not be afraid or ashamed of taking our time, of giving our time freely without direction, forgoing answers so that we might bear the difficult and even outrageous questions that emanate from a moment of rupture. We need questions that can actually help us think, that enable us to see the novelty of the present – not overstating, not preempting what might be – to return to the rough ground, so to speak, so we can find our feet again. No quick answers, just questions.

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